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Jeremiah Mercurio

Fairfield University, jmercurio@fairfield.edu

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FAITHFUL INFIDELITY: CHARLES RICKETTS' ILLUSTRATIONS FOR TWO OF OSCAR WILDE'S POEMS IN PROSE

Jeremiah Romano Mercurio
(University of St Andrews)

Abstract

The artist, collector, and critic Charles Ricketts (1866–1931) has often been characterised as a reactionary voice in early-twentieth-century debates about modern art. Although he responded conservatively to modern-art developments such as those embodied by the term 'Post-Impressionism', his work in book design and illustration exemplifies progressive strategies of decoration that reconfigure the relationship between author and illustrator as one of collaborative authorship. Ricketts' illustrations are autonomous narratives that not only reproduce the meanings of the texts they represent, but also parody and elaborate on them. Moreover, Ricketts' book designs and illustrations represent a complex resistance to and working out of Oscar Wilde's views on art, language, and orality. Wilde regarded visual art as inferior to language because the latter can embody the graphic and is free from the former's fixity in time and materiality. Ricketts' illustrational strategies are designed, not only to reinforce his own autonomy, but also to disprove Wilde's description of visual art as limited compared with language. Ricketts' progressive strategies of design are epitomized by his unpublished illustrations for Wilde's *Poems in Prose* (1894), a text which dramatises the centrality of voice to Wilde's poetic endeavour and allows Ricketts directly to challenge Wilde's denigration of the visual arts.

By focusing on two representative examples, Ricketts' drawings for 'The Disciple' and 'The House of Judgment', and by providing close readings of both image and text, this piece traces Ricketts' illustrational methods and reveals their debts to Wilde's own theories of orality, language, and visual arts, charting Ricketts' divergences from Wilde's texts and highlighting the critical dialogue implicit in the illustrations. Ricketts' drawings for the *Poems in Prose*, currently held at the Tullie House Museum & Art Gallery in Carlisle, have never been published together as a set, and the juxtaposition of the two drawings here is a preliminary attempt to set these illustrations in conversation with each other.

As an illustrator, stage-designer, painter, art critic, and collector, Charles Ricketts (1866–1931) played a central role in the debates over modernism and sought to determine the direction of art in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Great Britain. His influence over these debates, however, was not straightforward, but rather simultaneously reactionary and progressive. On the one hand, as his biographer J. G. P. Delaney describes, Ricketts had a 'backward- rather than forward-looking mentality'.¹ Ricketts deplored modern art's devotion to novelty for novelty's sake, the impulse, he felt, of Cézanne, Matisse, Gauguin, and other 'Post-Impressionist' painters: 'Novelty in itself is valueless. The spirit of beauty and power, of which art is

¹ J. G. P. Delaney, *Charles Ricketts: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 15.

the expression, has centuries behind it; it is as old as thought'.² On the other hand, while seemingly at odds with key modernist developments in form and colour engendered by 'Post-Impressionism', Ricketts supported and identified with new artistic styles and forms suited to coping with the conditions of modernity without 'sweeping clean [. . .] the slate of tradition'.³ In line with this approach, Ricketts' own graphic art, especially the designs and illustrations produced for Oscar Wilde's work, embodies an *avant-garde* style and employs progressive strategies of design that bridge Victorian and modernist aesthetics. This essay will investigate Ricketts' use of these strategies in a series of unpublished drawings designed for Wilde's *Poems in Prose* (1894). These illustrations are progressive in both their autonomous relationship to the text and their deft translation of the oral tale into a graphic medium, explicitly challenging Wilde's assertion that language is superior to other artistic forms.

Recent analyses of Ricketts' work by Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, Nicholas Frankel, and David Peters Corbett, underscore that Ricketts' book designs and illustrations, especially those commissioned for Oscar Wilde's work, represent innovative reconfigurations of the relationship between text and image. For example, Kooistra identifies Ricketts' illustrational strategy in Wilde's *The Sphinx* (1894) as a form of *impression*, her term for an approach in which 'pictorial representation of the text is less important than critical interpretation and decorative embellishment'.⁴ Although Ricketts' designs for *The Sphinx*, on some levels, reflect the content of Wilde's poem, Kooistra denies the illustrations' subservience to the text:

Ricketts's choice of scenes to be illustrated, his introduction of highly personal symbols, above all his decorative style, combine to make the images equal and independent partners in the image/text dialogue.⁵

Frankel also traces Ricketts' deployment of autonomous designs within a number of Wilde's books, including *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), *Poems* (1892), and *The Sphinx*. In an essay on the 1892 edition of Wilde's *Poems*, Frankel compares this later version with the 1881 edition in order to highlight the ways in which Ricketts' design alters textual meaning and to establish 'the book's design as a sign-system in its own right'.⁶ Regarding *The Sphinx*, Frankel similarly argues that 'the relation between book and poem is not in fact one of simple parity or reflection', emphasising that the

² Charles Ricketts, *Pages on Art* (London: Chapman and Company, 1913), p. 150.

³ David Peters Corbett, *The World in Paint: Modern Art and Visuality in England, 1848–1914* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), p. 254.

⁴ Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, *The Artist as Critic: Bitextuality in Fin-de-Siècle Illustrated Books* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1995), p. 17.

⁵ Kooistra, p. 98.

⁶ [Nicholas] Frankel, 'Book Decoration and the Poetic Text: Charles Ricketts's Designs for Wilde's *Poems* (1892)', *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 30 (1997), 67–87 (p. 69).

'decorated book poses in real terms what the poem rehearses at the level of the imagination'.⁷ That is, the sphinx's semantic opacity within the text is dramatized by a typographical and illustrational design that obscures the text itself. Lastly, Corbett also argues that in Ricketts' relationship with Wilde the former had 'to assert himself and his own creative autonomy against the subordinate position of illustrator and designer'.⁸ Like Kooistra and Frankel, Corbett notes that Ricketts' designs for *The Sphinx* 'depart from the text in a multitude of minor ways'.⁹ However, Corbett stresses that 'the 'full-page illustration still depends [. . .] on fidelity to the subject set by the text'.¹⁰ According to Corbett, though, even this act of fidelity indicates Ricketts' resistance to Wilde, whose own calls for autonomous illustration are undermined by Ricketts' faithful rendering of the written text. As all three critics argue, Ricketts' designs for Wilde's books are innovative in their independence from the verbal text and in their re-defining of illustration itself.

More than an additional example of Ricketts' resistance to Wilde, the series of illustrations for *Poems in Prose* suggests that Ricketts' strategies of design respond to and are at least partially grounded in Wilde's own theories of orality, language, and visual art. Wilde's privileging of voice in his own work emerges in response to what he saw as Walter Pater's increasingly cumbersome and inert prose. In Wilde's view, the intricacy of this prose reveals a compositional method designed solely for the printed page; that is, Pater's prose seemed to Wilde 'far more like a piece of mosaic than a passage in music' and, therefore, 'lack[ing] the true rhythmical life of words and the fine freedom and richness of effect that such rhythmical life produces'.¹¹ As Linda Dowling argues, this kind of prose 'satisfied [Wilde's] desire for variation and "visual" arabesque', but its static quality 'alienated the ear'.¹² To counter the limitations of such materially oriented prose, Wilde called for a return to voice: 'Yes: writing has done much harm to writers. We must return to the voice'.¹³ Wilde's focus on the voice led to his adopting an improvisational and synthetic style in his own writing and oral story-telling. Deirdre Toomey describes this type of compositional style in oral cultures, noting that 'originality in an oral culture consists not in inventing an absolutely new story but in stitching together the familiar in a manner suitable to a particular audience, or by introducing new elements into an old story'.¹⁴

⁷ Nicholas Frankel, *Oscar Wilde's Decorated Books* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000), p. 171.

⁸ Corbett, p. 136.

⁹ Corbett, p. 165.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', in *Intentions* (London: James R. Osgood McIlvaine, 1891), pp. 93–213 (p. 113).

¹² Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 185.

¹³ Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', p. 114.

¹⁴ Deirdre Toomey, 'The Story-Teller at Fault: Oscar Wilde and Irish Orality', in *Wilde the*

Orality, thus, engenders a fluid style in which the dexterity of the teller is paramount.

Not only did Wilde call for a return to voice as a way to reinvigorate written texts, but he also privileged language in general as a medium superior to other modes of artistic expression. For example, in 'The Critic as Artist', Wilde demotes the visual arts by arguing that language has a greater expressive power:

[T]he material that painter or sculptor uses is meagre in comparison with that of words. Words have not merely music as sweet as that of viol and lute, colour as rich and vivid as any that makes lovely for us the canvas of the Venetian or the Spaniard, and plastic form no less sure and certain than that which reveals itself in marble or in bronze, but thought and passion and spirituality are theirs also, are theirs indeed alone.¹⁵

Wilde implicated visual art along with Pater's overly material prose as fixed and rigid forms, bound by time and physical existence. Being itself frozen in time, visual art is unable to represent time adequately: '[t]he image stained upon the canvas possesses no spiritual element of growth or change'.¹⁶ Wilde's belief in visual art's inferiority led to his conception of illustration 'as an underlining and reinforcing of the autonomy and power of the text'.¹⁷ In other words, Wilde conceived of textual illustration as evidence of language's generative power. As Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, collectively known as 'Michael Field', recount in their journal, Wilde most approved of illustrations that did not reflect the content of a book because 'he holds that literature is more graphic than art, and should therefore never be illustrated in itself, only by what it evokes'.¹⁸ In Wilde's opinion, there is no need for an illustration to reproduce the written text because language can engender an image better than visual art. Paradoxically, Ricketts must, in order to distance himself from Wilde's preference for autonomous illustration, faithfully represent at least some of Wilde's text. This position partly explains why Ricketts' illustrations and design for *The Sphinx* 'shuttle between fidelity and independence'.¹⁹ In *The Sphinx*, Ricketts shifts between explicit independence and covert resistance masked as fidelity to the written text, and he takes up a similar position with respect to *Poems in Prose*. In the latter text, however, Ricketts is also eager to establish illustration's equality with the oral tale, specifically by creating dynamic, fluid, generative images that symbolically, if not literally, extend beyond the limits of time and space. In short, Ricketts had to

Irishman, ed. by Jerusha McCormack (London: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 24–35 (p. 28).

¹⁵ Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', p. 119.

¹⁶ Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', p. 134.

¹⁷ Corbett, p. 162.

¹⁸ Michael Field, *Works and Days*, ed. by T. and D. C. Sturge Moore (London: John Murray, 1933), p. 139.

¹⁹ Corbett, p. 166.

demonstrate his independence from Wilde by performing a number of tasks; he needed directly to counter Wilde's claims about the inferiority of visual art, to demonstrate that graphic art could be as dynamic and vital as language—particularly the spoken word—and to perform his autonomy, both by diverging stylistically and substantively from Wilde's texts, and by reinforcing those same texts.

Although Wilde interprets orality as a sign of language's superiority to other art forms, there is a strong affinity between oral tales and impressionistic strategies of illustration. By dint of their improvisational quality, oral tales threaten to destabilise the textual product, altering the written text through multiple performances and revisions. Autonomous illustrations similarly re-imagine a written text and alter its meaning. All six of Wilde's published prose poems began as oral tales, and are consequently ideal vehicles for Ricketts' method of illustration, providing the opportunity to establish his illustrations as equal to Wilde's prose. The six prose poems collectively titled *Poems in Prose* were first published together in the July 1894 edition of *The Fortnightly Review* and include the following: 'The House of Judgment', 'The Disciple', 'The Artist', 'The Doer of Good', 'The Master', and 'The Teacher of Wisdom'. Shortly after their publication, Ricketts began sketches—which he later described as 'amorphous' and 'particularly cursive'—to illustrate the prose poems.²⁰ A 1924 letter from Gordon Bottomley to Ricketts reveals that Ricketts had originally intended to produce an independent volume of his drawings paired with Wilde's text: Motivated by Ricketts' resumption of work on his illustrations around 1924, Bottomley implores Ricketts 'to publish the whole set with the text [of the prose poems] in the way you planned thirty years ago'.²¹ Ricketts never completed the edition of his illustrations with Wilde's prose poems, but he did produce nine pen-and-ink illustrations²²—one for each of the six prose poems Wilde published, with two designs and three drawings for 'The Doer of Good' and an additional sketch of three dancing figures, which might have been intended to serve as a frontispiece.²³

²⁰ Ricketts to Gordon Bottomley, 27 July 1918 (London, British Library, Add MS 61718). Ricketts wrote to Gordon Bottomley earlier in the month, asking: '[D]id I tell you I found a batch of old Vale scraps, tracings and drawings, published and unpublished, for the *Dial* of 1889 [for] *Daphis and Chloe*, *The Sphinx*, and for Wilde's *Poems in Prose*—the latter were found before Egypt, put away, and then forgotten[?]' (Ricketts to Bottomley, July 1918 [BL Add MS 61718]). It is difficult to know to what extent these 'scrawls' formed the basis for the later drawings completed around 1924. After completing the latter, he wrote to Gordon Bottomley, saying: 'Recently I executed eight drawings in my old manner illustrating Wilde's *Poems in Prose*' (Ricketts to Bottomley, 13 June 1924 [BL Add MS 61719]).

²¹ Ricketts' precise intentions for publishing these illustrations are unclear, although Gordon Bottomley reveals in a letter to Ricketts that the latter had planned to publish the text and images together: 'The only thing I need to be perfectly content is to hear that you mean to publish the whole set with the text [...] in the way you planned thirty years ago' (Bottomley to Ricketts, 29 July 1924 [BL Add MS 58091]).

²² Eight more or less finished illustrations and one sketch.

²³ The sequence of the illustrations' composition and Ricketts' intended order for them in any book

These drawings are currently held at the Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery in Carlisle and form part of an album of Ricketts' late work, which also includes a second series of illustrations for *The Sphinx*.

Before printing his prose poems in *The Fortnightly Review*, Wilde recited these six tales—and many others—in conversation to his approving peers, many of whom, including William Butler Yeats and André Gide, singled out his speech as his best work. Ricketts, too, valued Wilde's speech more than his writing, remarking to Anthony Pye that 'nothing written by Wilde hints at the richness of his conversation'.²⁴ As musings on the prose poems, Ricketts' improvisations on Wilde's themes are in keeping with the spirit of orality and the prose poems themselves. Not only are Wilde's prose poems improvisational, but they also draw from a store of pre-existing literary material, and in this respect the story-teller performs the role of the critic as defined by Wilde in 'The Critic as Artist':

For just as the great artists, from Homer and Æschylus, down to Shakespeare and Keats, did not go directly to life for their subject-matter, but sought for it in myth, and legend and ancient tale, so the critic deals with materials that others have, as it were, purified for him, and to which imaginative form and colour have been already added.²⁵

Ricketts' illustrations again parallel Wilde's prose poems, this time in their appropriation of literary tradition. The drawings use Wilde's tales as raw material for Ricketts' purposes, while also overlaying a critical discourse of art and weaving a dense fabric of allusions to literary and art history.

There is not enough space in this article for a discussion of Ricketts' entire series of illustrations for Wilde's prose poems, but two examples, those drawings for 'The Disciple' and 'The House of Judgment', are representative of the set, all of which share a similar approach to illustrating Wilde's texts. Moreover, it is easy to extract

he may have planned to publish is difficult to determine. Also, one page from the album is torn out, and on the stub T. Sturge Moore (signed 'T.S.M.') has written: 'taken out *The Thinker in Bronze* [*The Artist*] 10/13/32'; it is unclear whether or not this drawing has been returned. *The Artist* is affixed by tape to a stub from which it appears detached, suggesting that this might be the removed illustration reinserted and attached to a different stub. It could also be the illustration that Ricketts presented to Gordon Bottomley, which Bottomley had framed and which is also held at Tullie House along with the album (Ricketts to Bottomley, 13 June 1924 [BL Add MS 61719]). Otherwise, there is another illustration for 'The Artist', but this seems unlikely given that Ricketts records completing only eight illustrations (Ricketts to Bottomley, 13 June 1924 [BL Add MS 61719]).

²⁴ Charles Ricketts, *Self-Portrait: Taken from the Letters & Journals of Charles Ricketts, R.A.*, collected and compiled by T. Sturge Moore, ed. by Cecil Lewis (London: Peter Davies, 1939), p. 178.

²⁵ Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', p. 137.

these two prose poems from the series of six published in *The Fortnightly Review* because they are the only two to have appeared in print—both in *The Spirit Lamp* (1893)—prior to their publication as a set.²⁶ Both 'The Disciple' and 'The House of Judgment' embody Ricketts' subjective interpretation of Wilde's prose poems; they are designed to translate Wilde's texts into the language of graphic art and into Ricketts' personal style and symbolic world. Additionally, the illustrations directly challenge Wilde's claims for language's superiority to other art forms by mimicking the traits of the oral tale—instability, trans-temporality, improvisation; furthermore, they critique Wilde himself and creating a space for Ricketts' own position as author.

'The Disciple'

In many ways, Wilde's 'The Disciple' is an ideal text for Ricketts' progressive method of illustration. Having appeared in two different versions published by Wilde (as mentioned above), this prose poem has a publication history that captures the quality of reinvention inherent in the oral tale. Not only did Wilde recite and publish 'The Disciple' multiple times, but other writers recorded the tale in their own publications; Gide, for example, reprints the prose poem in his recollections of Wilde.²⁷ 'The Disciple' is itself a reinterpretation and parody of Ovid's retelling of the Narcissus and Echo myth in *Metamorphoses*, also a highly parodic text, which diverges from, undermines, reorders, and re-contextualizes the Greek myths from which it draws. Ricketts' embellishments and commentary on Wilde's prose poem, in turn, recreate Wilde's improvisations on the text in speech and in print. Although Ricketts' illustration for Wilde's text is progressive in its reconfiguration of the relationship between image and text, its illustrational strategy adopts the same approach to storytelling embodied by Ovid and Wilde; Ricketts becomes a third bard, making his strategy of design germane to the spirit of Wilde's prose poem. Although Ricketts' illustration is sympathetic to Wilde's tale, Ricketts' positioning of himself as a third story-teller undermines Wilde's assertion that visual art lacks the same range and flexibility of the poet.

Ricketts' illustration for 'The Disciple' (figure 1) cites from the text, inserts material of Ricketts' own invention, incorporates aspects of the prose poem from unrecorded recitations, draws in material from other prose poems by Wilde, and critiques the character of Wilde himself. A brief summary of Wilde's tale compared with Ricketts' corresponding illustration will highlight the way the latter diverges from the text. The prose poem retells the story of Narcissus from the perspective of the pool in which Narcissus would admire his reflection. The narrative begins at the

²⁶ 'The House of Judgment', *The Spirit Lamp*, 17 February 1893, pp. 52–53. 'The Disciple', *The Spirit Lamp*, 6 June 1893, pp. 49–50.

²⁷ See André Gide, *Oscar Wilde: In Memoriam (souvenirs)*; *Le 'De Profundis'* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1910)



Figure 1 Charles Ricketts, *Illustration for Oscar Wilde's 'The Disciple'*, n.d., Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery, Carlisle. Pen, ink and Chinese white, 23.2 x 15.2cm. 1971.85.35A.15 (Image courtesy of Tullie House Museum & Art Gallery; reproduced by kind permission of the copyright holders, Leonie Sturge-Moore and Charmian O'Neil).

point of Narcissus' death and captures the reaction of the Oreads and the pool. Seeing that the pool has turned into a 'cup of salt tears', and assuming that the pool, most of all, admires Narcissus because it had continually witnessed the latter's beauty, the Oreads attempt to sympathise with the pool: 'We do not wonder that you should mourn in this manner for Narcissus, so beautiful was he'.²⁸ However, the pool is actually unaware of Narcissus' beauty, explaining that 'I loved Narcissus because [. . .] in the mirror of his eyes I saw ever my own beauty mirrored' (pp. 23–24). Wilde contravenes readers' expectations by disrupting the tale's anticipated narrative trajectory, emphasising the subjective nature of artistic reception (in this case, the appreciation of Narcissus' beauty) and demonstrating that even long-established myths remain subject to reinterpretation.

Ricketts continues this process of inversion and critique by embellishing further on the tale. Upon seeing the illustration, the viewer is immediately struck by a key difference between the image and text: the presence of the centaur, which appears to the left of Narcissus. This centaur makes no appearance in any version of 'The Disciple', nor does it appear in Ovid's tale of Narcissus. Ricketts imports the centaur from another of Wilde's prose poems, 'The Poet', unpublished by Wilde but retold by Ricketts in his *Oscar Wilde: Recollections* (1932).²⁹ In that prose poem, a man recounts invented stories about his encountering mermaids, fauns, centaurs and various other mythological creatures. One day he actually sees these creatures and is thereafter unable to tell any more stories. Claiming to quote Wilde, Ricketts describes the man's experience of the centaur: '[it] peeped at him behind a hollow rock'.³⁰ The centaur in his illustration for 'The Disciple' is performing this precise action, which suggests (in the absence of other antecedents) that it is the same centaur from 'The Poet'. While Deirdre Toomey describes how 'this tale, and in particular the motif of the centaur slowly turning his head, obsessed Ricketts', the inclusion of the centaur in this illustration is more than a product of his obsession.³¹ Firstly, its presence in an illustration for 'The Disciple' creates an inter-tale dialogue. The oral tradition itself carries on this dialogue with other tales, borrowing frames and devices

²⁸ Wilde, 'The Disciple', *The Fortnightly Review*, 56 (July 1894), 23–24 (p. 23). Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent references to the *Poems in Prose* will be given after the quotations in the text and will be from the following edition: *Poems in Prose* (*The Fortnightly Review* [July 1894], 22–29).

²⁹ Although no known version of 'The Poet' was published by Wilde, he did claim to be bringing it out 'in a Paris magazine above my signature' (*The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Rupert Hart-Davis [London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962], p. 809). A partial manuscript exists: see *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, Volume 1: Poems and Poems in Prose*, ed. by Bobby Fong and Karl Beckson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 217–218. Wilde also explains that the cave where 'The Teacher of Wisdom' resides in the eponymous prose poem is 'a cavern in which a Centaur had once dwelt' ('The Teacher of Wisdom', p. 27).

³⁰ Charles Ricketts, *Oscar Wilde: Recollections* (Bloomsbury: Nonesuch, 1932), p. 18.

³¹ Toomey, p. 32.

and employing them in unexpected contexts. The centaur's inclusion does precisely this, expanding the narratological reference of the illustration in the same way that prose poems do. Furthermore, the centaur had a special meaning for Ricketts. Lamenting Gide's omission of the centaur in his retelling of the tale, Ricketts explains:

Strangely enough Gide omits the episode of the centaur, yet this detail has remained vivid in my memory, for Wilde, by an almost imperceptible turn of the head, when speaking, conjured up the movement of the receding creature.³²

That the centaur's movement reminds Ricketts of Wilde's own movement 'when speaking' implies that the centaur is itself an emblem of orality, an embodiment of Wilde's story-telling. Ricketts might have read Wilde's tale as an admonition against pictorial representation—the tale's protagonist can no longer invent after seeing his mythological creatures—and therefore included this symbol of Wilde in his illustration in wilful disregard for Wilde's low opinion of the visual arts. However Ricketts reads the tale, he has invoked the oral within a purely pictorial form by personifying the act of speaking and alluding to the story-teller—Wilde himself. In doing so, Ricketts challenges the notion that Wilde's tale is stunted by his drawing, demonstrating that the tale remains dynamic in spite of its being illustrated.

The centaur's inclusion stands in for orality, myth, and inter-narrativity, but it also marks the illustration as parody, a pastiche of Wilde's story-telling in the language of illustration. This parody extends to a personal critique of Wilde and his reputation for lasciviousness, which he acquired notably after his trials. Although sympathetic to Wilde's homosexuality, Ricketts disapproved of his friend's more flamboyant behaviour. His association of Wilde with the centaur underscores this judgment. By representing Wilde as a centaur, Ricketts also locates the former within a specific tradition of visual art from which the latter had a number of models for his own centaur. J. G. P. Delaney argues that 'the general inspiration [for Ricketts to employ centaurs in his work] was the numerous classical and Renaissance depictions he must have seen in the Louvre and the British Museum' (p. 147). In particular, Ricketts must have had in mind Botticelli's *Pallas and the Centaur* (c. 1482), in which Pallas Athena tames a centaur, who signifies man's baser nature, and Gustave Moreau's *Dead Poet Borne by a Centaur* (c. 1890), in which the image of poet and centaur are directly linked.³³ The symbol of the centaur, then, is polysemous to a large degree, allowing Ricketts to represent Wilde—and by extension story-telling—within the content of the illustration itself, to parody Wilde and his more extreme

³² Ricketts, *Oscar Wilde: Recollections*, p. 17.

³³ Botticelli's *Pallas and the Centaur* was reproduced, along with T. Sturge Moore's ekphrasis on the painting, in the art journal co-edited by Charles Shannon, *The Pageant* (1896), I, p. 227.

behaviour (subverting Wilde's moral authority), to subsume a metaphor of orality within the context of graphic art (challenging the supremacy of the written—or spoken—text in word/image relationships), and to practise a form of literary criticism that juxtaposes multiple prose poems (specifically 'The Poet' and several versions of 'The Disciple') within the context of a single illustration.

Another, less ostensible, aspect of Ricketts' illustration that redefines the relationship between image and text is his figuring of Narcissus and the reflection pool. Narcissus' presence in the illustration is itself a divergence from the text, since both printed versions of the prose poem (from *The Spirit Lamp* and *The Fortnightly Review*) begin 'when Narcissus died'.³⁴ A sceptical viewer might argue that Narcissus is already dead in the illustration, his left arm hanging lifelessly over a stone. His right arm, though, is positioned in a way difficult to maintain without effort. The same is true for the position of his body. A more likely reading, then, is that Ricketts intended an anachronistic, trans-temporal reading of the illustration—one that refutes Wilde's earlier-quoted claim that visual art cannot adequately represent time. A similar trans-temporality pervades the history of the oral tale, transforming tales across multiple recitations and story-tellers. Positioning himself as a story-teller, Ricketts' inserts an analepsis absent from the text, which begins only after Narcissus' death. This analepsis allows Ricketts to comment on Wilde's story by reincarnating Narcissus while omitting the reflection of his face from the pool—a central aspect of the myth. While part of Narcissus' arm and, perhaps, part of his lower body are discernible in the pool, his face, including the eyes with which he gazed at his reflection, are rendered invisible by the illustration's perspective. The effect of this removal of Narcissus' face from the illustration is that—at least in the context of Ricketts' drawing—the pool is unaware, or at least indirectly aware, of Narcissus' presence. For the viewer to witness Narcissus' visage in the pool would be to imply that the pool *sees* him, but Wilde's inversion of the myth is to turn the pool into another Narcissus, valuing Narcissus because his eyes cast back the pool's own reflection. Ricketts radically departs from Wilde's story only to reinforce it in ways unimagined by the text.

'The House of Judgment'

The other prose poem that Wilde published in *The Spirit Lamp* is 'The House of Judgment', and Ricketts' accompanying illustration (figure 2) is the *tour de force* amongst his eight designs for *Poems in Prose*. It employs many illustrational strategies exemplified by his drawing for 'The Disciple' and adds to them a number of other elements, including a red/orange wash that makes this the only illustration to incorporate colour. Most important, the illustration is an example of the kind of

³⁴ Wilde, 'The Disciple', p. 23; for *The Spirit Lamp* version, see *The Spirit Lamp*, 6 June 1893, 49–50; repr. in *Complete Works*, Volume 1, p. 172n.

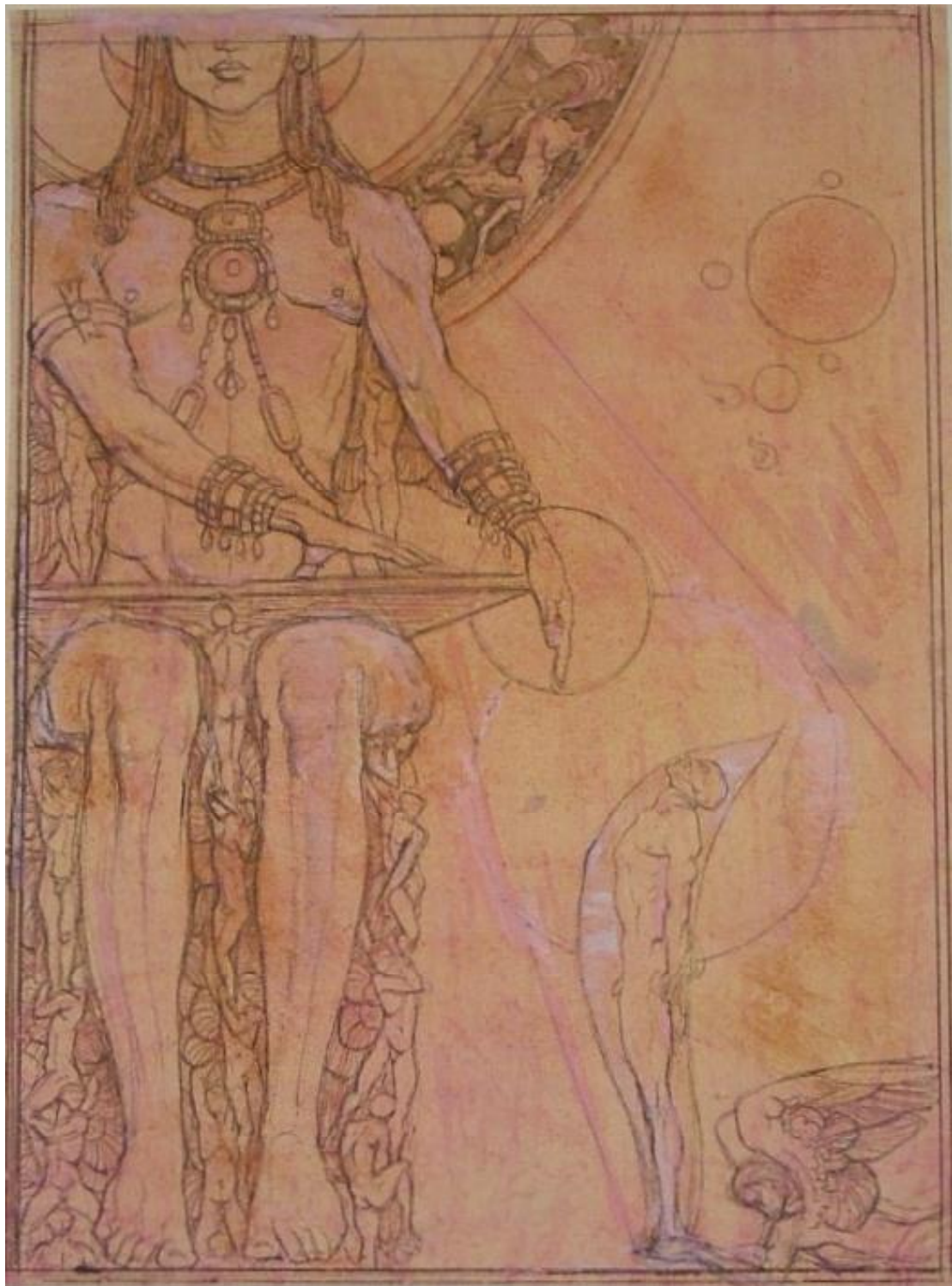


Figure 2 Charles Ricketts, *Illustration for Oscar Wilde's 'The House of Judgment'*, n.d.. Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery, Carlisle. Pen, ink, water-colour and Chinese white, 22.2 x 16.1cm. 1971.85.35A.16 (Image courtesy of Tullie House Museum & Art Gallery; reproduced by kind permission of the copyright holders, Leonie Sturge-Moore and Charmian O'Neil).

original art that Wilde calls for in 'The Critic as Artist', in which he bemoans art that is 'immobile, hieratic, and confined to the reproduction of formal types'.³⁵ It explores the limits of what illustration means through a dialogic engagement with Wilde, enacting the drama of subverted authority that is at the centre of Wilde's prose poem.

A brief analysis of Wilde's 'The House of Judgment' will serve to illuminate the relationship between Ricketts' illustrations and the text. Centred on the relationship between textural authority and orality, the prose poem recounts the dialogue between God and a sinner standing before him for judgment. Largely a catalogue of sins, the tale begins with an attempt by God (or, perhaps, the narrator) to preserve the authority of the text over and against the oral: 'And there was silence in the House of Judgment, and the Man came naked before God' (p. 24). Immediately afterward, God 'open[s] the Book of the Life of the Man' (p. 24). It is only after silence has been secured that God turns to the textual record, protecting the written history from the destabilising effects of the spoken word. The god described here is the authoritarian God of the Book of Revelation, who proclaims that he encompasses the entire narrative of the world; he is 'the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and ending'.³⁶ The book of life from which God reads in Wilde's prose poem is an embellishment on a passage from the book of Revelation, in which the book's author, assumed to be St. John, describes seeing 'the dead, small and great, stand before God: and the books were opened: and another booke was opened, which is the booke of life: and the dead were iudged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works'.³⁷ Wilde's prose poem exploits the question of authorship already suggested by the book of Revelation. If God is to judge these sinners by the content of books written by their own deeds, then ostensibly God does not author the text. Of course, Wilde's prose poem is not an exegetical reading of the book of Revelation, and so the philosophical and theological question of free will is immaterial here. 'The House of Judgment' does not seek to answer the question of free will, but instead explores the nature of authorship and textual authority. God, by virtue of his omniscience and assertion of narrative sovereignty in the Book of Revelation should be the author of the text, but his inability to anticipate the sinner's verbal replies indicates that he ceases to author the narrative of the man's life.

Orality consistently undoes God's authority—his ability to fix the meaning of words—throughout the text. The written account of the sinner's life is insufficient as a judgment in itself and must be performed—read aloud—in order to be enacted. Once God's judgments are spoken, however they acquire the improvisational attributes of orality and his narrative authority is consequently undermined. After each of three times God reads the list of transgressions from 'the Book of the Life of the Man', he must close the book to await the sinner's reply. The sinner's subsequent response in

³⁵ Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', p. 123.

³⁶ KJV, Revelation 1:8.

³⁷ KJV, Revelation 20:12.

turn reveals how the oral undoes the textual by emphasising that the book is a record of his deeds only: 'Even so *did* I' (my emphasis). This is consistent with the Book of Revelation, which describes the books as records of sinners' lives 'according to their works'. Once God closes the book for the final time, he tries to maintain his narrative authority, saying to the sinner, 'Surely I will send thee into Hell. Even into Hell will I send thee' (p. 25). In reply, the man 'crie[s] out', as Wilde writes, and says, 'Thou canst not' (p. 25). This challenge to God's decree further demonstrates the dexterity of the oral versus the predominantly static quality of the textual. God attempts to form a narrative out of the written record, but his judgments, spoken to the sinner, possess the same fluidity inherent in oral tales. The man does not question what God reads from the book of his life, but he does challenge what God *says*. The oral is, thus, always susceptible to being undone, misheard, reinterpreted, and reworded. When the man goes on to say that God cannot cast him into Hell because he has always lived there, Wilde gives God no reply—'And there was silence in the House of Judgment' (p. 25). Not only is God unable to reply, but he is forced to change his mind entirely: 'Seeing that I may not send thee into Hell, surely I will send thee unto Heaven. Even unto Heaven will I send thee' (p. 25). God's loss of authority is apparent in his language. The multiplicity of meanings inherent in the word 'even' demonstrates this. Ostensibly, God is using the word in the way it frequently appears in the King James Version of the Bible, which is as an adverb denoting exactly or just as; however, 'even' also has the connotation of level or to the ground, and the *Oxford English Dictionary* describes one old English usage as a verb meaning 'to throw (a person) down'.³⁸ The latter meaning is appropriate to God's announcement that he will cast the sinner into Hell, but, in the context of sending the man to Heaven, it reveals a slippage in God's ability to control both the situation and his language. Even insofar as the word signifies 'exactly' or 'precisely', it still reveals God's loss of control because his proclamations are challenged and undermined by the man both times. God is no more successful when he attempts to send the sinner to Heaven; the man responds to this command that 'never, and in no place, [has he] been able to imagine it' (p. 25). Ultimately, God is unable to say anything because of his own reliance on a written narrative, which is why the prose poem ends on the refrain 'And there was silence in the House of Judgment' (p. 25). This ending is not so much a narrative cul-de-sac as it is an acknowledgement that orality creates open-ended, malleable narratives.

One of the chief ways in which Ricketts recreates this narrative flexibility in his illustration is by visually translating the written text into an instrument for his own narrative—specifically by depicting the 'Book of the Life of the Man' as a tablet or canvas. By portraying the book as a symbol of seemingly static art, Ricketts underscores the rigidity of the written text (as envisioned by the book of the life in 'The House of Judgment') and, furthermore, suggests the book's usefulness as a tool

³⁸ *OED* online (accessed 15 March 2010).

for the visual artist. If the text is a tablet or canvas, then the illustrator can inscribe his own narrative onto the book. Ricketts' argument that illustration is a sufficiently flexible form challenges Wilde's implicit and explicit arguments to the contrary. Whereas Wilde argues that only language can embody all the other arts, Ricketts rejects Wilde's limiting of the synaesthetic power of visual art. Paradoxically, he achieves this by extending visual arts' reach beyond the visual, most clearly by drawing the figure of God larger than the illustration's frame, thereby cutting off his eyes and symbolically eliminating the visual from the drawing.³⁹ In so doing, he mirrors Wilde, whose prose poems attempt to imbue the written word with the flexibility of the oral tale, thereby expanding the form by creating a liberating paradox: a written text with the traits of an oral tale. Taking his cue from Wilde's paradoxes, Ricketts turns the symbol of bibliocentrism—the Book of the Life of the Man—into a work of visual art. This is yet another example of Ricketts' faithful infidelity in illustrating Wilde. The form of 'The House of Judgment' performs what the narrative of the prose poem enacts. Ricketts proves to be most faithful to Wilde's text by translating the narrative into the language of his own medium. Simultaneously, he undermines Wilde by demonstrating that it is not just the oral tale (or even the written text), but also the art of illustration that can possess the mobility for which Wilde strives.

Furthermore, Ricketts emphasises his freedom from Wilde's text by mimicking the latter's use of allusion and parody. Wilde's prose poem is not only an elaborate parody of the Book of Revelation, but also a dense patchwork of literary allusion. For example, the list of sins that God reads is an appropriation of Tannhäuser's recitation of his transgressions to the pope. (Wilde would have been familiar with the legend of Tannhäuser through a number of sources including Swinburne's 'Laus Veneris' [1866], Morris' 'The Hill of Venus' [1869], and most important Wagner's opera *Tannhäuser*, first performed in 1845.) Wilde alludes to Wagner to demonstrate further the power of words to cross genres. Moreover, the language of the list of sins is itself also imbued with a musicality recreated elsewhere in Wilde's work, notably in the elaborate catalogues of Chapter XI in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Wilde promotes this densely allusive writing style in 'The Decay of Lying':

Art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself. She is not to be judged by any external standard of resemblance. She is a veil, rather than a mirror. She has flowers that no forests know of, birds that no woodland possesses. She makes and unmakes many worlds, and can draw the moon from heaven with a scarlet thread.⁴⁰

³⁹ This is also an allusion to George Frederic Watts' *Time, Death and Judgment* (c. 1870s–1886).

⁴⁰ Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', in *Intentions* (London: James R. Osgood McIlvaine, 1891), pp. 1–55 (p. 30).

Ricketts' illustration for 'The House of Judgment' heeds Wilde's call for art to be hermetic, responding to Wilde's allusiveness by duplicating it within the field of art history. Ricketts incorporates elements from a number of paintings—especially those with models for the figure of god—including Watts' *Time, Death and Judgement* (c. 1870s–1886) and *The Court of Death* (c. 1870–1902), and Gustave Moreau's *Salome Dancing before Herod* [so-called 'Salome Tattooed'] (c. 1874), *Salome* [Salome Dancing before Herod] (c. 1874–1876) and *Jupiter and Semele* (c. 1889–1895). These paintings, particularly Moreau's, are in turn highly allusive. For example, the figure of Jupiter in Moreau's *Jupiter and Semele*—one source for Ricketts' God figure—was also constructed with borrowings from a number of earlier god models, described by Geneviève Lacambre as being: 'The central Trinity panel of Jean Bellegambe's *Polyptych of Anchin*', 'a small bronze that decorated [Moreau's] mantelpiece, an ancient fresco that he had copied in Naples, Ingres's *Jupiter and Thetis*, and an Apollo with his lyre in one of John Flaxman's line engravings'.⁴¹

Ricketts' God figure goes beyond mere allusion, revealing itself to be the representation of an artwork within an artwork. In other words, Ricketts' God figure represents a figurine rather than a deity. The human (or angelic) figures that make up his throne show the God figure to be inanimate. The two figures flanking God's torso reveal that he has no agency because they, and not God, are apparently controlling God's arms, turning the pages for him. God is, then, at best a puppet or a pliable statue. The figures are neither the damned nor the saved—they are merely decorative flourishes, as is suggested by the frieze behind God. Initially appearing to be a halo or the back of God's throne, this frieze rehearses some of the dominant themes in Ricketts' illustrations. The centaur in the frieze evokes the pediment sculptures from Zeus' Temple at Olympia, which depict the fight between the Lapiths and the centaurs, in which the centaurs disrupt the wedding that the Lapiths have gathered to celebrate. Like the centaur in 'The Disciple', this centaur also represents Wilde, repeating the parody of Wilde's behaviour and visualising an emblem of orality. Ricketts again symbolically injects the oral and literary into his illustration and emphasises that illustration is equally as multifaceted as the oral tale.

Ricketts' use of a reddish-orange wash in 'The House of Judgment' reveals another one of the illustrator's critical tools. Unique amongst the illustrations in its use of colour, the drawing evokes Watts' *Time, Death and Judgement*, which Ricketts describes in a letter as 'all red, orange and gold'.⁴² This allusion continues Ricketts' engagement with other visual artworks; moreover, the wash suggests a literary source, Isaiah 1:18, in which God implores, 'Come now, and let us reason together [. . .] though your sinnes be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red

⁴¹ Geneviève Lacambre and others, *Gustave Moreau: Between Epic and Dream* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago in association with Princeton UP, 1999), p. 236.

⁴² Ricketts to unidentified recipient (probably Shannon), 1927 (BL Add MS 61720).

like crimson, they shall be as wooll'.⁴³ Not content merely to comment on Wilde's own use of Biblical sources, Ricketts himself draws from the Old Testament to re-imagine the Judgment. Furthermore, Ricketts use of colour serves as a parody of Wilde, who employs the word 'scarlet' frequently throughout *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and in many other works. In *Dorian Gray*, Basil Hallward directly alludes to the passage from Isaiah: 'It is never too late, Dorian. Let us kneel down and try if we cannot remember a prayer. Isn't there a verse somewhere, "Though your sins be as scarlet, yet I will make them as white as snow"?'⁴⁴ This passage precedes Dorian's murder of Basil, which adds another sin to the catalogue. Undoubtedly Ricketts would have been aware of Wilde's penchant for the word 'scarlet', and thus he casts Wilde in the role of the sinner by covering his illustration in a red wash. He thereby both reinforces and undermines 'The House of Judgment', in which orality undoes textual authority, placing Wilde in the role of the poet whose voice-infused writing undoes fixed textual analysis. Ricketts also physically locates Wilde within the illustration for the second time, making him the sinner figure held up by a sphinx. This association of Wilde with the sphinx is clear to an audience familiar with Ricketts' role as the designer and illustrator of Wilde's *The Sphinx*. The sphinx image not only serves to link the sinner with Wilde himself, but it also reminds the reader of Ricketts' collaborative authorship of *The Sphinx*. Ricketts' illustration, then, casts Wilde into a broadly, though not exclusively, visual environment. If Wilde promotes himself, and is perceived by others, including Ricketts, as a conversationalist and teller of tales more than an author of written texts, then Ricketts' depiction of him in his illustration is, in part, another attempt to infuse the oral into the visual, thereby demonstrating illustration's own improvisational quality.

Perhaps more than any of Ricketts' other illustrations, his drawings for *Poems in Prose* directly challenge Wilde's explicit critique of the visual arts in 'The Critic as Artist' and the implicit critiques in his fiction, such as the implied critique in 'The Poet'. Ricketts combines autonomous illustrations with faithful renderings of Wilde's text in order to declare Ricketts' independence as an illustrator—his freedom from having accurately to depict the written text—and his autonomy as a thinker—his freedom from having to draw only what the text evokes. Furthermore, because the prose poems centre thematically and structurally on themes of orality, and because Wilde promotes voice as the most dynamic artistic mode, Ricketts's illustrations for the *Poems in Prose* are able to countermand Wilde's views by recreating the prose poems' fluidity and fecundity within a visual medium. Ricketts challenges Wilde, not just in the ways described in this essay, but in varying ways throughout his entire series of drawings for the prose poems. For example, Ricketts composes two designs and three drawings for 'The Doer of Good', and, in so doing, shows that the visual artist can revisit the same theme in ways similar to the oral story-teller. There is no

⁴³ KJV, Isaiah 1:18.

⁴⁴ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Ward, Lock and Co., 1891), p. 235.

evidence of Wilde's having seen the illustrations for *Poems in Prose*, and so it is difficult to register how he might have received them. The fact that Ricketts never published the set, in spite of Bottomley's imploring him to do so, also suggests that Ricketts was somewhat ambivalent about his achievement. One might read his reluctance to publish the illustrations as yet another means of keeping the project perpetually open-ended and resisting Wilde's denigration of visual art as a static artistic mode.

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